

The Mughal  
Scenic Animal Carpet  
in the  
National Gallery of Art,  
Washington, DC

*Syamali Das*

The Widener Carpet,  
Mughal, early 17th century,  
4.16 x 1.91 m.  
National Gallery of Art,  
Washington, DC.



It may come as a surprise that in the world of hand-knotted carpet weaving India stands alongside Iran as one of the largest producers of the handloom. The tradition goes back to the period of the early Mughals, if not earlier. Akbar was interested in carpet weaving and started workshops in his capitals with experienced carpet designers and weavers from well known centres in Persia. This is well documented by Abu'l Fazl in his encyclopaedic work, *A'in-i Akbari*. He adds the comment that the weavers here have become so adept in their work that people no longer think of those fabled centres of carpet weaving in Iran and Turan, though carpets are still imported from places like Goshkan, Khuzistan, Kirman, and Sabzwar. This is high praise indeed as Persian carpets under the Safavids reached the highest watermark in carpet weaving anywhere in the world. Mughal designers and carpet weavers evolved their own vocabulary and style and created stunning pieces the likes of which are rare in the history of carpet weaving. Unfortunately, very few carpets that can be securely dated to Akbar's workshops, or those of his successors, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, have survived, and the few that have are distributed in museums and collections abroad. Some of these are so attractively and intricately designed and finely woven, that carpet scholars and weavers everywhere have heralded them as great productions. As they are not so well known in their country of origin, it is my endeavour to present one of the finest examples here, to highlight its intricate design, pristine beauty, and uniqueness.

The carpet selected here is the superb Scenic Animal Carpet, known to carpet scholars as the Widener Carpet, in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, an unlikely home for a Mughal carpet. It was part of a large and important bequest by Joseph E. Widener (1872–1943) to the National Gallery of Art in 1942 that consisted of Old Master paintings, sculptures, Chinese porcelain, European tapestries and furniture, along with a small group of Persian and Mughal carpets – all collected by his father Peter A.B. Widener (1834–1915) at the beginning of the 20th century, and further enriched by him. I recently had the rare opportunity of savouring the beauty and the unique design of the wonderfully preserved carpet, and spent almost an entire day studying it with the help of Julia Burke, Head of Textile Conservation at the National Gallery of Art.





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Detail showing a stylized composition of a camel combat.

The carpet is 4.16 metres in length and 1.91 metres in width (13 feet 4 inches x 6 feet 3 inches), a size that was favoured by the Mughals for use in their durbars. The warp and weft are of undyed cotton and the pile is of dyed wool. The predominant colour of the field and border is red with a range of shades of red, brown, yellow, orange, and pink as well as colours like blue, green, and violet used to depict the large variety of flowers, plants, floral motifs, birds, small and large animals in their original colours. The knot count is approximately 260 per square inch, not as fine as some of the ultrafine silk or pashmina carpets woven in the Mughal carpet workshops, but in keeping with the surviving carpets of this period. What is striking in this carpet is its field design that shows animals, real and mythical, leaping to fight and pursue one another against a background network of scrolling vines connecting racemes, leaves, palmettes, and rosettes in a repeat pattern. Specific depictions of a rhinoceros, a "eared" crocodile, a stylized composition of a camel combat, a young prince riding a caparisoned elephant, a large winged dragon swallowing an antelope, a tiger attacking a leopard, and a small dark-skinned elephant are placed along a vertical central axis. The animals in the rest of the field include blackbucks and deer, markhor, cheetah, fox, wolf, hare, and mythical animals like winged wolves, winged spotted lions (*chi-lin*), and a human headed *chi-lin*. In the lower half of the carpet most of the animals run leftward while in the upper half most of them run to the right to complete a circular whirl.

The wide border around the field is composed of alternating cartouches and quatrefoils against dark pink-red arabesque work. There are six ogival cartouches each on the longer sides and two each on the shorter sides on an ivory background, each containing a grotesque human face at the centre of the scrollwork of palmettes and animal heads. The blue quatrefoils contain the image of a bird in pink that can be identified as a partridge, alternately shown standing or in flight. Carpet scholars have noticed similar grotesques and birds arranged in cartouches and quatrefoils in at least two other Mughal carpets, one of which was presented to the Japanese Emperor by the Dutch in 1650. Grotesques and masks have been found in the borders of a specific series of luxurious Persian carpets as well.

The presence of animals in combat or in chase is not uncommon in Persian carpets, and in some velvets – shown in Mughal paintings of Akbar's period – used as clothing or tent linings. However, nowhere are they shown running and jumping with such great velocity and vitality. The only art object where



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Detail with elephant and rider.

large numbers of animals are shown running for life in such a sweeping whirling movement is a double-page composition of the *Akbarnama* in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, designed by Miskin and completed by the celebrated animal painter Mansur and his colleague Sarwan in about 1595. It shows an image of the hunting exploits of Emperor Akbar over several days in the vicinity of Lahore in 1567 when the rebel Hamid Bakhari was humiliated and punished by having his head shaved and being made to ride an ass backwards. (No. IS 2-1896 56/117; S. Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor: The Art of the Book 1560–1660*, London: V&A Publications 2002, plate 42.)

The motif of combating camels was derived from a well known picture by the great Persian master Kamal-al din Bihzad acquired by the Mughals and preserved in the Gulshan Album compiled by Emperor Jahangir between 1599 and 1618. At least two fine Mughal versions made by Khwaja 'Abd-us Samad and Nanha have survived, the latter bearing Jahangir's autograph



4

Detail with elephant and cheetah.

dated 1608–09. Two Mughal carpet fragments bearing the same motif have come to notice, testifying to its popularity.

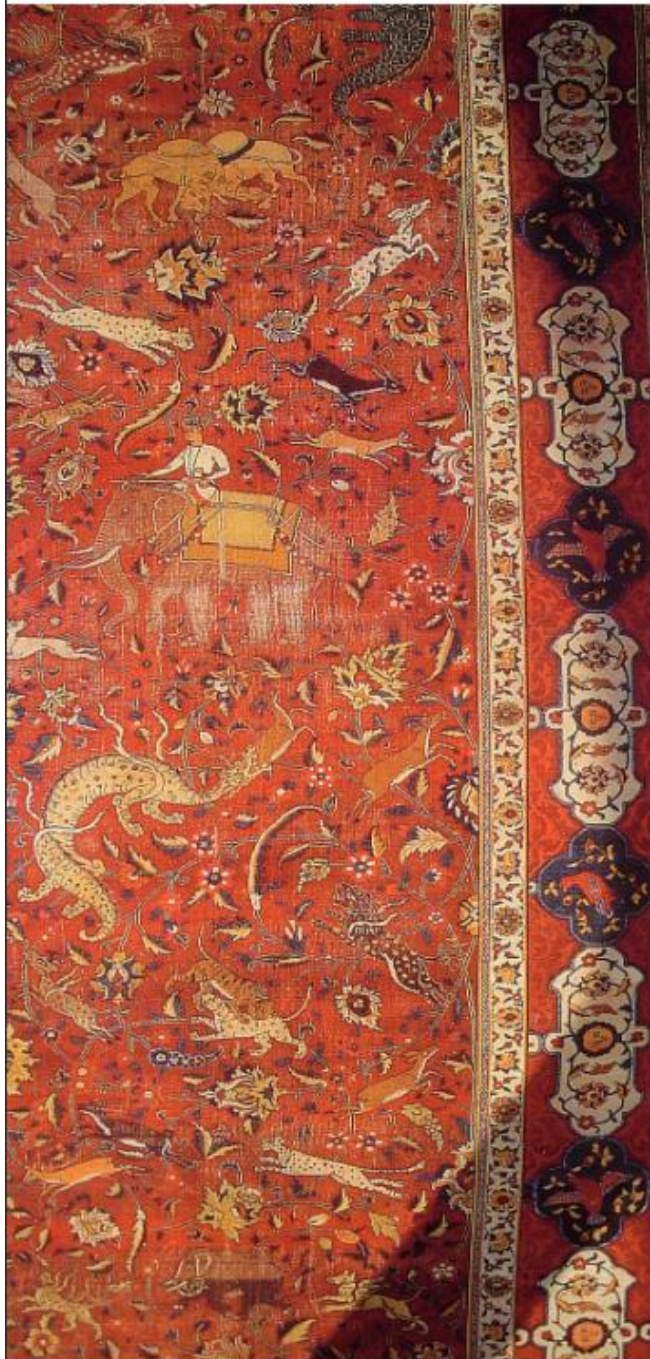
After Babur's first encounter with a rhino near Begram in Afghanistan in 1525 and his detailed notice of the animal in the section on flora and fauna of Hindustan in the *Baburnama*, the rhino appears several times in paintings of the four known manuscripts of the *Baburnama* prepared in the last decade of the 16th century at the Mughal atelier, and in various paintings associated with Prince Salim's hunting expeditions and occasional noting in his memoirs, *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*.

Similarly the gharial, a variety of crocodile found in the rivers of northern India, was noticed by Babur and pictured in all four illustrated manuscripts of the *Baburnama*. These or similarly conceived marine creatures are also noticed in Mughal paintings showing naval combats and other scenes of rivers and oceans. The young prince (or alternatively a mahout) on a caparisoned elephant appears several times in the second *Akbarnama* manuscript prepared in the early years of the 17th century and other related works. The elaborate drawing of the dragon shown in the carpet is based on dragons found in Persian painting and adapted by the Mughals in their works – painting, architectural decoration, decorated tiles, book bindings, and textiles – as a recurring motif. There are some excellent drawings of dragons in images of "King Solomon's Court" or "Assembly of Birds and Animals" painted by Miskin and others in the later years of Akbar's reign.

Very close parallels have come from another source: the borders of some of the folios of the luxurious album (or albums) collated for Emperor Jahangir. The bulk of these folios remain unpublished but it is possible to trace close parallels in some

5 (opposite)

Detail showing mythical and real stylized animals.



examples published by Milo Beach, and in some folios of the album in the German State Library, Berlin. The arrangement of the marginal illuminations of the folios of these albums closely resembles the design of carpets like the present one.

It appears therefore that the design of this carpet was derived from a variety of sources, Chinese dragons as adapted in Persian painting, Bihzad's composition of combating camels, Mughal paintings drawn in the 1590s showing rhino, gharial, tiger, markhor, cheetah, and hunting scenes with leaping, jumping, and "flying" animals. The basic field design is of scrolling vines with leaves, racemes, flower heads, palmettes, and rosettes derived from well established Persian carpet design – all neatly and realistically redrawn and coloured to suit Mughal taste. Moving animals have been used extensively in carpets and textiles (velvets, embroidered and brocaded court textiles) by the Mughals and a number of these have been traced, but here, in this unique example, these are combined with static forms of unusual animals and reptiles for the first time in a carpet.

This brings us to the problem of placing the piece in a secure chronological framework. The painter Miskin was not active beyond 1600, though Mansur who was associated with him in the Lahore hunting scene of the *Akbarnama* discussed above was the principal painter of this genre in the early 17th century. Jahangir had deep interest in rare and unusual trees, plants, flowers, birds, and animals and he entrusted Mansur with drawing lifelike images of many of these. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that he had a hand in creating the design of this magnificent carpet.

The history of the carpet is not known beyond the fact that it was owned by the Duke of Rutland in England and used in Belvoir Castle. Peter Widener bought it at a sale held by Duveen Brothers, New York and London, on November 18, 1909. It was exhibited several times in the USA and London, most recently in 1989–90 in the show *Romance of the Taj Mahal*, curated by Pratapaditya Pal, and in 1997–98 in the show *Flowers Underfoot* curated by Daniel Walker. It has been extensively published by the foremost carpet historians but deserves further attention and study.

#### Figure Acknowledgements

Images courtesy the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



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